

## Let's Talk About Menopause

### What is Menopause?

Menopause is when a woman stops having periods and is no longer able to get pregnant naturally.

For 90% of women, periods do not just stop. They tend to become less frequent over a few months to years. However, some women may experience shortening of their cycle. A slight increase in the amount of menstrual blood loss is common.

Menopause is a natural part of aging and usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age. The average in the UK for a woman to reach menopause is 51 years. A natural menopause occurs because the ovaries cease producing eggs and make less oestrogen (the main female hormone).

Menopause is said to be early (or premature) if it occurs before the age of 45. Menopause occurring before the age of 40 years is known as premature ovarian insufficiency.

There are certain things that may cause an early menopause, for example:

- Surgery to remove the ovaries will likely lead to the development of menopause symptoms straight away
- Radiotherapy to the pelvic area as a treatment for cancer may lead to early menopause
- Some chemotherapy medications that treat cancer may cause an early menopause
- Early menopause can run in families
- For women who have a hysterectomy (surgical removal of the womb) before their menopause, it may not be clear when they are in the menopause as they will not have periods after surgery. Oestrogen levels typically fall earlier than average and other symptoms may still be experienced
- Often no cause can be found for an early menopause

### Menopause Symptoms

Approximately 80% of women will experience menopausal symptoms. Around 25% of women have very severe symptoms. The length of time that symptoms are present varies and some women may only experience symptoms for a few months, whilst others experience symptoms for years. More than half of women have them for more than 7 years.

Common symptoms include:

- Hot flushes  
Approximately 75% of women experience these, and they can typically last a few minutes causing flushing of the face, neck and chest, and may be accompanied by excessive sweating. Some women become giddy, weak or feel sick during a hot

flush. Palpitations (“thumping heart” sensation) and feelings of anxiety can also be experienced.

- Sweats  
These commonly occur at night and, in some cases, are so severe that sleep is disturbed.
- Difficulty sleeping
- Tiredness
- Headaches
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Aches and pains in joints
- Loss of sex drive (libido)
- Vaginal dryness and discomfort during sex

### Problems Following Menopause

Following menopause, women’s bodies can change in several ways:

- Skin and hair can become drier and thinner. Skin is more likely to itch
- Vaginal dryness due to lack of oestrogen
- Osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) can make women more prone to fractures
- The risk of cardiovascular disease (diseases of the heart and blood vessels) increases after menopause.

### **When to see a GP**

It is worth talking to a GP if you are experiencing menopausal symptoms that are troubling you or if you experience symptoms before the age of 45 years. GPs can normally diagnose menopause without the need for blood tests, but a blood test to measure hormone levels may be carried out if you are aged between 40-45 years old.

Other blood tests or scans may be carried out, particularly if there are symptoms that are not typical during menopause. It is also important to keep up to date with the national cervical programme and breast cancer screening programme, if appropriate.

## **Menopause treatment**

GPs can offer treatments and suggest lifestyle advice if women have severe menopausal symptoms that interfere with day to day life. Treatments offered by GPs may include:

- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)  
These come as tablets, skin patches, gels and implants to relieve menopause symptoms by replacing oestrogen
- Vaginal oestrogen creams, lubricants and moisturisers are available for the treatment of vaginal dryness
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)  
A type of talking therapy that may help with low mood and anxiety

GPs may need to refer women to menopause specialists if symptoms do not improve after trying treatment or if HRT is not a viable option.

## **Self Help Tips**

Eating a healthy, balanced diet and exercising regularly to maintain a healthy weight can improve menopausal symptoms. Tips for reducing hot flushes include:

- Cutting out or reducing coffee and tea
- Stop smoking
- Keep rooms cool and use a fan if necessary
- Spray your face with cool water or use a cold gel pack if you feel a hot flush coming on
- Wear loose layers of light cotton or silk clothes
- Have layers of sheets on your bed instead of a duvet so that you can remove layers as required
- Cutting down on alcohol
- Sip cold or iced drinks
- Have a lukewarm shower or bath instead of a hot one

**Please note that the above is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. You must consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for the diagnosis and treatment of any medical condition that you may have.**